1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

CHAPTER II

OECOLOGY

I

FROM a European's point of view Nuerland has no favourable qualities, unless its severity be counted as such, for its endless marshes and wide savannah plains have an austere, monotonous charm. It is throughout hard on man and beast, being for most of the year either parched or a swamp. But Nuer think that they live in the finest country on earth and, it must be admitted, for herdsmen their country has many admirable features. I soon gave up trying to convince Nuer that there is any country more suited for cattle husbandry than their own, an attempt rendered more useless since a few of them have been taken to Khartoum, which they consider to be the home of all white men, and, having seen the desert scrub of that latitude, have been confirmed in their opinion that their land is superior to ours.

The grasses necessary for the welfare of the herds depend for existence on suitable conditions of soil and water. The soils of Nuerland are heavy clays, broken by the sun into deep cracks in the drought and sodden in the rains. They hold up water and consequently enable certain species of grasses to survive the dry months and provide pasture for the cattle. Nuer and their cattle would not, however, be able to live if it were not that there are more sandy elevated spots on which they can take refuge in flood-time and where they can practise horticulture.

Surface water comes partly from rainfall and partly from the flooding of the rivers which traverse Nuerland and is more than adequate to make grass. In an average year the rains commence in April, when a few showers fall and the sky is overclouded, but it is not till the end of May that they set in with a will. At their maximum, in July and August, the weather is cool, even cold in the mornings and evenings, the sun is overcast during most of the day, and a south-westerly wind prevails. Showers become lighter and less frequent in October and usually have ceased altogether by the middle of November when the north wind begins to blow. It blows consistently down the valley of the Nile

6: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936)1938
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

sticky water-laden mud. The clayey plains are broken by occasional sandy ridges and knolls upon which the débris of years of occupation has accumulated. However, Nuer distinguish between the black soil, of such areas as Eastern Jikany country, which they call *mun mi car* or *dök* and the more sandy soil, which is found, for example, in parts of Lou country, and which they call *mun lita*. The black heavy clays are more suitable for cultivation of millet because they hold up rain water, but they are bad for cattle which in the rains have to struggle through the sticky mud and to eat the high coarse grasses which such soil nurtures rather than the sweeter short grasses which prevail on more sandy soils. Thus the Lou people say in favour of their country "Our cattle do not come back each day from grazing caked in mud but they return with clean hooves." On the other hand the more sandy parts of Lou country, *e.g.*, near Muot Dit, do not hold up rain water which makes cultivation of millet difficult so that even a slight drought destroys the young plants, and often makes it necessary for the people to wander early and far from their villages in the dry season to obtain sufficient pasturage. There are no salt-licks in Nuerland.

Surface water comes partly from direct rainfall over Nuerland and partly from the flooding of the principal rivers which traverse it and which derive most of their water from rainfall elsewhere. In an average year the rains commence in April and continue till the end of October. Towards the middle or end of April a few showers come down and the sky is overclouded. It is not till the end of May that the rains set in with a will. July and August are the months with heaviest rainfall and the weather is cool, even cold in the mornings and evenings and a south-westerly wind prevails. The sun is overcast during most of the day. Showers become lighter and less frequent in October and by the middle of November have ceased altogether. In November the north wind begins to blow and it blows consistently down the valley of the Nile from the Mediterranean to the Plateau of the Great Lakes till the approach of the next rains. The weather becomes warmer and warmer and from January till March is a great trial to Europeans.

6: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936)1938
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

be imagined when one has to stamp one's way through water for ten miles at a stretch. The rank grasses prevent one from leaving the paths and the paths form miniature depressions down which water flows so that it is like walking in the bed of a tiny stream, a sticky bed where every step requires an effort to extract the foot. Rengyan country is amazing at this season of the year. One walks for miles through water to emerge suddenly on a ridge, screened by high grasses till one begins to mount it. Here is a village. One walks through the village to descend into water the other side, and then through miles of water to the next inhabited island. To live in such a country one should be amphibious, like the Nuer, who seem to be in no way inconvenienced by what are to Europeans appalling conditions.

The rains cease in November but so saturated is the earth that a late heavy shower will again innundate the country for 48 hours.

The dry season among the Western Nuer is not so severe as it is among the Eastern Nuer because there is never a shortage of water and the villages are never far from deep lagoons and streams, nor even from the main rivers themselves with their broad fringe of marshes. It is probably only in an exceptionally dry year that the larger inland watercourses entirely dry up. Probably this is in the main due to the fact that the Bahr el Jebel and the Bahr el Ghazal do not sink in their beds like the Sobat and Pibor, since they are fed by permanently flowing streams and have enormous lake and marsh reservoirs. The water of streams and lagoons in Western Nuerland is therefore not so rapidly drained as in Eastern Nuerland. Certainly the water in big streams in Dok country seems to be permanent and in walking through Lek country as late as February in 1930 we had to wade frequently through deep swampy streams and lagoons.

Nuer have expressions to denote the natural features of their country. A treeless plain they call *ghau mi dea* or, in contrast to dry elevated ridges, *pan*. A ridge or knoll is called *kwir* and *thur* or, in reference to its suitability for human occupation, *gwaadh wec*. Land which is partly inundated in the wet season, but not sufficiently to be called swampy, and is therefore suitable for growing millet, is called

6: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936)1938
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

tap. A big open river is generally called *kir e.g.* the Bahr el Jebel and the Sobat but a river may have its proper name, *e.g.* the Bahr el Ghazal is called Naam. Smaller rivers or streams are denoted by the word *yir*. A marshy depression inland is called *wang* and a big lagoon running out of one of one of the main rivers is called *bar*. A marshy depression running parallel to a river bank is called *tor*. *Toc* are extensive swamps which form the flood plains of rivers.

VIII

From my description of their country it will be seen that the Nuer are faced with problems which daunt men better equipped than them. For they are so poor that they have little but their courage and their knowledge to master a harsh environment. Nuer have to consider how to protect and pasture their cattle and also how to grow maize and millet, for they practise both cattle husbandry and hoe-culture and have to take the requirements of both into account. As gardeners their difficulties only arise in the rains for in the dry season nothing will grow in the waterless wastes. As herdsmen there are problems to be solved at all seasons. Gardening will be described later. Here we may consider how Nuer ensure the welfare of their herds by adapting their life to the seasons.

Excess or insufficiency of water is their first problem. It is essential that men and cattle should be protected from the water which covers most of the country in the rains. Cattle get diseases of the hooves and die if they have to stand in water. Protection is given to man and beast by building huts and byres on higher ground. In selecting a village site two considerations must be borne in mind. Firstly there must be a sloping ridge off which rain-water can run to the plain below and this ridge must be broad enough to allow huts and byres to be built and for the cattle to be tethered in the kraals outside the byres. Preferably it should also be broad and long enough to allow the flocks and herds to pasture without having to descend into the inundated plains to graze among the tall rank grasses. Secondly there must be land on one side of the ridge suitable for cultivations, *i.e.*, land which will retain sufficient water for the millet to grow

12:Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1930-1931) 1933
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

about the district and the lineage which lives there as interchangeable terms and speaks of *cieng* WANGKEAC in the sense of the WANGKEAC lineage. This leads a European into depths of confusion since the WANGKEAC lineage and the people who live in the village of Wangkeac are by no means the same thing. I shall have occasion to plumb these depths of confusion, into which I have myself been long plunged, in the following sections.

Cieng, in the singular, e.g., ciengda (my homestead), is the same as *gol* in the singular, e.g., *golla* (my homestead), and *cieng* in the plural, e.g., *ciengdan* (our hamlet), which means the same as *gol* in the plural, e.g., *gollan* (our hamlet). The literal meaning of *gol* is the large dung fire which occupies the centre of every cattle byre. During the wet season this is kept continually alight and serves to keep mosquitoes away from the cattle and the young men who sleep on a platform above it, while during the daytime people sit around it and chat. In the dry season the *gol* is a huge heap of ashes enclosed by a windscreen and around it sleep the inmates of the windscreen and there also they spend a large part of the day watching their cattle, drinking milk, sleeping and smoking. This dung fire signifies the home and especially symbolises the household from the point of view of its male occupants since women have their own cooking fires. *Jigoalla* (the people of my *gol*) are the people of my household, especially the menfolk of my household. *Gol* Cam or *gol* Pec is the homestead or windscreen of Cam or Pec and hence means the household of Cam or Pec. *Ran gol* Cam is a member of Cam's household and *jigoal* Pec is the household of Pec, i.e., the people who habitually live in his homestead and make use of his cattle byre.

The only other Nuer word I will draw attention to in this place is *dor*. I think that the most comprehensive meaning of *dor* is what is not actual homestead. The word generally means "bush" in contrast to *cieng* (home), e.g., "*wa dor*" ("I am going into the bush" almost "I am going out") is the opposite to "*wa cieng*" ("I am going home"). Different parts of the bush can be designated by some conspicuous landmark as the *dor* of such and such a thing. The word is noticed in this place because it is often used to refer to the unoccupied land lying around a homestead or hamlet which is used for sowing maize or on which goats and sheep and calves graze. In this sense *doran* (our dor) has much the same meaning as *ciengdan* (our *cieng*), though the former word seems

12:Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1930-1931) 1933
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

823 196 rather more inclusive. But both are used to refer to " our home," " our hamlet," " our village." Thus Pukur (Lek tribe) village is divided up into a number of hamlets, and one may speak of each hamlet with the unoccupied land around it which divides it off from neighbouring hamlets as a *dor* and designate it by some landmark, e.g., *dor ngop* (the part of the village which lies near the *gameiza* (fig-tree)), *dor wich kwer* (the part of the village which lies around a sandy eminence) and *dor thok ruop* (the part of the village which borders the forest). As we have already noticed, such territorial expressions become identified with the people who occupy the territory, so in this case we may speak of CUOL *ngop* and CUOL *wich kwer*, the section of the CUOL lineage who live near the *Gameiza* tree and the section of the CUOL lineage who live near the sandy eminence.

I mention these three Nuer words, *eieng*, *gol*, and *dor*, because they are so frequently heard on Nuer lips and to explain that my reason for using them so seldom in the text is that they refer to so many different things according to the context in which they are spoken.

III.

621 I have spoken of the clan as forming the iron girders upon which the political structure of the tribe is built up; I have spoken of each tribe having a dominant element within it; I have mentioned that the territorial groups of Nuer country integrate themselves around a kinship nucleus and that their cohesion depends upon this nucleus as much as upon communal life or locality; I have remarked that as the ties of kinship become more and more distantly stretched they weaken and that they weaken also by the dilution of kinship with other elements and that both these processes are reflected in the manner in which tribal groups segment. These assertions need explanation. It is very difficult to analyse Nuer society without repetition because when we speak of the tribe we are also speaking of political aggregates which crystallise around some clans. Yet it is imperative to keep these two groups, the tribe and the clan, distinct if endless confusion is to be avoided. Much of the confusion of Jackson's account is due to the fact that he did not 619 clearly differentiate between them.

361 614 Herein lies a great difficulty. The Nuer tribe always has a name derived from the name of the country which it occupies, e.g., one may

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

that 'one explanation put forward for this abstention is that the bird can fly in the skies and is accordingly in communication with the Great Spirit'.[1] The *jakok in rol*, the pied crow, a bird which frequents Nuer homesteads, is especially favoured because it is the bird of the female spirit *buk*, the mother of *deng*. Nuer say that 'everyone respects the pied crow', and one sometimes hears it spoken of as *kuaar*, priest. Nuer can therefore readily entertain the idea of a bird being the totem of a lineage, being, that is, an emblem of Spirit conceived of in relation to a lineage. Also, whilst I would hesitate to say that all Nuer have a high regard for snakes, it can be said that they do not go out of their way to harm them, whether they belong to lineages which respect snakes or not. They leave them in peace unless they are threatened by them or suddenly afraid of them. All Nuer seem to regard them as being in some sense manifestations of Spirit, so that, here again, it appears natural to those who do not respect them that other people should do so. Some of the more important totems are trees. To all intents and purposes, and so far as any question of showing them respect or otherwise is concerned, this means trees of certain species when they grow on village sites, and no Nuer, and not only those who respect them as totems, would injure trees growing near their homesteads. Nuerland is for the most part treeless savannah country, and trees which give shade, such as sycamores and to some extent the tamarind, are rare. Nuer have a feeling that those which give them shade in their sun-baked homes have grown there by a special dispensation of God. Their being there at all is a manifestation of Spirit, and all the more so if, as is sometimes the case, they have grown from saplings or cuttings planted as shrines to spirits. Here again, therefore, people can easily understand that such trees are regarded by some lineages as material manifestations of a special relationship of Spirit to themselves.[2] Rivers and streams also have a general spiritual significance for all Nuer because they are associated with *buk man deang*, which is the spirit of all rivers. It is *kwoth pini*, the spirit of water. Nuer say that '*yier e kwoth neini dial*', 'rivers are the spirit (totem) of everybody'. Again, monorchids are for all a sign of spiritual activity, as is also the birth of a calf with cuany markings.

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[1] H. C. Jackson, op. cit., p. 169.

[2] It may be noted that the Nuer word for tree, *jath* (pl. *jen*), is probably the same word as the generic term for totem in Dinka, *yath* (pl. *yeth*) (P. A. Nebel, *Dinka Grammar*, 1948, p. 170).

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

765 ceremony, and I was told that it is dangerous for them even to
782 smell the cooking meat. Everyone then moved off to sit in front
[561] of a hut to listen to the commemorative orations, which are also invocations; and here were spread out on the ground the ghost's possessions, his fighting-spears and fishing-spears, his beads, his metal arm-rings, his ostrich-shell girdles, his pipe, and, since his son was senior government interpreter in the district, his clothes and whistle, articles not possessed by ordinary Nuer. At the side of these were placed the heads and hides of the cattle which had just been sacrificed. The people sat with their backs to the now rising sun and facing the direction of the setting sun because 'death follows the setting sun'. Nuer say that 'the west is the side of
●[823] death, the east the side of life', and the verb *kwony* in their
[196] language means both 'to bury' and 'to set' (the sun). When they sacrifice an ox for a sick man they hope it will fall towards the east. The master of ceremonies (pp. 287–9) of the ghost's family made the first commemorative oration, after throwing some tobacco towards east and west. As he spoke he walked up and down in front of the people brandishing the spear with which the animals had been sacrificed. He commenced his address (*lam*) by shouting out his ox-name. He must also have shouted out his clan spear-name, though I have not recorded it in my notebooks.

I did not take down his address at the time but I was told later that a master of ceremonies speaks in this wise: 'God, now thou hast given us badness, or is it simply the lot of creation? [Is the death thou hast sent us a special evil designed for us or has the dead man merely suffered what soon or late comes to all created things?] Now thou hast taken so-and-so [he names the dead man], now he has become one of thy people, turn about and take him right away. We who are left in the world, give us peace. Let his children who remain in the world be at peace. He is not finished, his children will carry on his name. In the future they will bear his name. Let no further evil befall us.' The master of ceremonies is now speaking to the ghost: 'So-and-so, my brother [or 'my father' if he was a much older man], now thou art one of God's people. Do not forget us, let it be thy habit to speak [on our behalf] to thy father [God]. When we go into the bush let us tread on wild rice [avoid all dangers and troubles]. Let us beget children. May all evil be taken away from us now, and may we remain in peace.' The master of ceremonies again addresses God: 'God, and

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

811 confirmed to some extent by the evidence of my photographs,[1] supported these conclusions, but I asked Dr. Lienhardt and Dr. Howell to verify them, which they have been able to do. It should [513] follow also that a husband sleeps on the right side of the hut and his wife on the left side, and here again Dr. Lienhardt has been good enough to confirm that this is the invariable practice. He has made a further and important observation. I was aware that the [823] west is associated with death and the east with life, but I did not know, till he told me, that east is identified with right and west with left, thus bringing into the left–right polarity the polar representations not only of life and death but also of the cardinal points east and west. I am indebted to Dr. Mary Smith for the further observation that Nuer speak of 'right-handed peace' (*'mal me cuec'*). They would never speak of left-handed peace.

It is in accord with what we have learnt of the associations with [826] left and right in Nuer thought that Nuer youths should emphasize the contrast between the two hands by putting the left arm 301 out of action altogether for months or even a year or two. This they do by pressing a series of metal rings (*thiau*) into the flesh of the left arm from the wrist upwards so tightly that sores and great pain result and the arm is rendered useless for any purpose other than the display of fortitude and as a passive instrument for the right hand to play upon (Plate XII). A ring on a finger of the right hand is rubbed up and down the discs on the imprisoned left arm to accompany the compliments and endearments of courtship. Such a mutilation is only fully intelligible in terms of symbolic associations. Here the fact that it is only the left horn of favourite [231] oxen which is debased (if the right is trained at all it is trained upwards) is of great significance, for, as will be seen, a man and his favourite ox are identified. What he does to his left hand he does to his ox's left horn: what he does to the ox he does to himself.

826 It is perhaps important to add that Nuer do not think of the 811 left hand as being in a material sense evil. Left-handed persons suffer no disabilities at all and are not considered in other respects as different from other people. Nuer do not, in my experience, attach any importance to the matter, but simply say of a left-

[1] All deformed horns in the photographs are left horns. Some branches in them, however, are to the left of the windscreens, but Nuer erect branches for practical purposes as well as for religious reasons, and I do not think it is possible to distinguish between them by sight.